

# **A biblical framework for understanding and engaging in politics**

## **Introduction**

Welcome to this mini series of posts which more or less mirror a talk I gave at the Salvation Army's training college this week. There'll be four posts in all but even spread across this many words and posts it is a fairly fast tour through the biblical themes. Hopefully, it will help provide a better understanding political authority, and what this should look like when worked out in the institutions of government.

Each of the posts offer a further layer to help us understand what the Bible has to teach us, so today we stay on quite a conceptual level, but hopefully by the end a picture full of texture and colour will have been built up. I also hope it will be clear why I consider politics as something essential for Christians to engage with. As this comes from a talk I apologise that the quotes aren't properly referenced, most of them come from *God and Government* edited by Nick Spencer and Jonathan Chaplin, but others I've dug out from a variety of other sources. However, I'd suggest you don't read that book because then you'd realise just how significantly it has influenced the development of these posts. (that was a joke. it's a fantastic book which I'd very strongly recommend, and I'll freely admit most of this comes from it)

In this first post I'll look at political authority in general and pull out three aspects of that authority which we can draw from the Bible.

In subsequent posts I'll consider how we should view the idea of government more specifically, and then a reasonable amount of time will be given to assessing the Lordship of Christ and what this can teach us about the exercise of political authority.

In the final post I'll touch on a few of the main purposes of government and how these are affected by our understanding of the bible.

## **Nature of political authority:**

### **powers as created**

So to start, let's take a look at the nature of political authority.

In the beginning God created the world. We understand creation as the divine work of calling all things into being.

And in Genesis while we see that the earth is created by God we also see humans given a role of authority – they are co-creators.

It's not just a one off command, a one time only opportunity; Adam and Eve were asked to name all the animals. They were told to go forth and multiply and to have dominion over every living thing that moves on earth.

This command is not just about biological reproduction, it is also about the work of governing, directing and developing culture. Nigel Wright states that *"The building of societies, nations and cultures is thus understood as part of human responsibilities before God, part of what we are called to do"*.

Government as an institution, or even the organisation of basic communities, would not exist outside of the human beings that comprise them. There is no franchise model that we buy into, government is not a pre-ordained, off the shelf, divine institution that we partake in. It is what we create.

The outworking of governance, and the form that it takes, is a product of our ingenuity and our God given creativity. It is what we do in our role as co-creators with God.

The political authority we recognise as government is what enables us to achieve goals that would be out of reach on our own. It is the way that we come together to build a social structure that works for the good of all.

So my first point is this: political authority is a divine creation in its origin but human in its prescription and its outworking.

### **powers as fallen**

If we stopped there we'd have a rather one sided view of political authority. Because it all sounds rather rosy, but it bears very little resemblance to the exercise of political authority we see around us.

Let's take a whirlwind tour through the outworking of political authority in the Bible because it doesn't always paint a picture of political authority as good. Representative democracy was not on the scene but there is still a good spread of different regimes.

We have Pharaoh and the Egyptians and their oppressive regime, we have the Babylonian and Assyrian Empires and the brutality that went with their conquest.

In the New Testament we see the Roman Empire in all its glory, bringing order to the known world but at the cost of human dignity.

In both Daniel and Revelation the empires of this world are described as a ravaging beast (Dan 2.31-45, 7.1-8; Rev 13).

If the institutions of political authority grow out of our human nature, then not only will they reflect the good that is in us, placed there at creation, but also the fallen and sinful nature to which we turned.

We should not be surprised that the exercise of political authority will be as corrupt as our own nature is.

Too often governments are simply an expression of domination, as Walter Wink says, wielding power through violent means over the majority for the sake of the elite.

It's taken a long time for political authority to move from serving those elites to acting in a way that is in the interests of the whole country. And we're not there yet.

Power isn't given up easily, even in our present democratic state we have to ask whether the exercise of political authority is done in a way that reflects our created state or our fallen nature.

We see that political authority is an ambiguous power. It is God given and it is honourable, it is an outworking of the cultural mandate we have been given.

But it is also used for the pursuit of self, and for the oppression of others. And we have seen this far too frequently throughout history.

### **powers as 'to be' redeemed**

This is not the end of the story, Nigel Wright comments, *"Fallenness is not the last word about anything or anybody"*.

If the institutions of political authority reflect ourselves as created in the image of God, and marred by our fallen nature, then they too can be redeemed.

Where once they worked to serve our ambitions and schemes, they can be turned to serve others and honour God. They can shift to fulfil the life enhancing role that God had in mind at their creation.

But the redemption is only ever partial in the here and now.

We live in a space where the Kingdom of God has begun to break in. But we see only a glimpse of its true glory. In the same way political authority will only be fully redeemed in the fullness of time.

This means we cannot hold too great a hope for the redemption of political authorities.

Yet it is a hope. It is a hope that the power of the state can be used to enhance life, promote justices and secure peace and prosperity for all.

When the exercise of political authority moves towards the work of justice it is both a reflection of the good in its original creation and itself a witness to the activity of redemption that is at work.

### **Therefore: government is an ambiguous concept**

I've very briefly outlined three aspects of political authority, but they don't operate separately, or consecutively. It is not that any particular political authority is good, fallen, or only on its way to redemption.

Instead the three aspects are threads that intertwine and exist simultaneously in all political authority.

Overall, this view of political authority as created, fallen and on its way towards redemption shows us that government is an ambiguous concept.

It's not to say that all examples of political authority are equal, at different times and in different places the redemptive possibilities may be nearly invisible as humans in their fallen state exercise authority with all the selfishness they can muster.

Likewise, we should not focus too much on any one of the three perspectives, if we consider only the original good that we are created with we can be naïve as to the potential dangers.

And too much focus on the fallen dismisses the potential for good and we can become paranoid about the exercise of authority.

If we forget about that redemption is only partial we can be overly optimistic about what will come next.

The three threads need to be held in tension.

And this ambiguous picture of political authority is reflected in the biblical ambivalence towards its outworking.

We'll look at the nature of government in the New Testament in a future post but it is worth noting Jesus' words to Pilate at this point. In John's gospel when facing trial before Pilate Jesus says: *"You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above."* (John 19.11)

There are limitations on earthly political authority, there are things it can do, but it cannot act alone, and it cannot act without recourse to a greater source of authority.

Julian Rivers assesses government as *"a natural product of human society made much harder by sin; a good gift, like marriage, and like marriage, easily distorted and subverted"*.

And I think this is a picture we would recognise. The modern state has achieved huge strides in promoting human welfare but it has not been without abuse.

In tomorrow's post we'll probe a little deeper into the nature and role of government as the outworking of political authority to understand this tension further.

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In yesterday's post I began to set out a framework for understanding and engaging with politics. I started out with a high level approach and showed that political authority has three key characteristics. It is created as good, it is fallen, and it has the potential for redemption.

Next, let's have a look at government in particular, and I want to suggest that the key way of understanding it is to view it as both legitimate and it is limited. First let's take a look at why it is legitimate.

### **The nature of government**

#### **government is legitimate**

We've already considered that political authority is a concept put in place by God, but government is the outworking of that political authority.

The writers of the Old Testament point to a God that was the creator of the heavens and the earth and as such held authority over all things. Psalm 82 tells us that He is supreme over all nations and their gods.

A number of times in the Old Testament God humbles the created gods that are put up to oppose him. This happens with the prophet Baal when the Ark of the Covenant is placed in the same tent and again for King Nebuchadnezzar, where in Daniel 4.34 he was forced to admit that God's dominion rules forever.

The psalmist recognised that the coming Messiah, the offspring of King David would exercise God's universal rule over all nations through one person. (Ps 2.4-6)

If we move into the New Testament we see the same picture reflected. The apostles saw Jesus as having complete authority and his rule placed him as a threat to the worldly rule of Caesar. (Acts 17.7)

In 1 Peter 2.13-17 and in Romans 13.1-7 government is shown as legitimate and established by God, and as a result we should submit to it.

What's interesting is that in both 1 Peter and in Romans the preceding sections could cast doubt on our submission to political authorities but the writers let this tension linger. Despite the challenges and potential problems, government is shown as legitimate.

The role of government is cast in broad terms: it is for commending the right and punishing the wrong.

Julian Rivers addresses this: *"Anyone who fulfils the task of government has a divine mandate for that task. At some point presumably a claim of authority loses its legitimacy but that point is not identified."*

Throughout scripture, in both the Old and the New Testament we see that human government is legitimate.

### **government is subject to the law and held to account**

Governments are legitimate because they are accountable to God.

In the fourth century when Emperor Constantine was declared God's representative on earth Gregory of Nazianzus insisted that precisely because Christians understand God to be Trinity, no human ruler can ever reflect God adequately.

And it has been a central claim of political theology down the ages that Kings remain answerable to God for their actions.

This conviction runs counter to the regular proclamation that 'God is on our side', whatever side that might be.

A core biblical theme is that each individual is accountable to God for the actions they take while on earth, and that has to include our political activity. (Matt 25.31-46)

As well as being accountable to God an important practical outworking of legitimate government is a human structure of accountability which gives space for critique from those who have some distance from the immediate decision making. But we'll come onto that in a little while.

### **government is limited**

The mandate for government is to commend the right and to punish the wrong. Both simple sounding and asking an awful lot.

We have perhaps got rather used to a picture of limited government, and in particular in non-conformist church circles, to not view the role of government as promoting true religion.

But in scripture we see a holistic picture that calls people away from a life that is focused on the self and towards reconciliation with the one true God.

We also are given a picture of new creation where there will be no more death or mourning, where everything will be made new.

So it's not immediately obvious that the role of Christians, whether in politics, the judiciary, the public sector, or anywhere else, is not to give themselves fully to the work of building God's kingdom and trying to achieve this through the institutions of government. It is not immediately clear what limits there are to the potential for government in meeting this goal.

However, government is necessarily limited because of the methods that are at its disposal. The final recourse of a human authority is the taking of life, and this sits awkwardly with a King who rejected the way of the sword.

It is also limited because you cannot coerce people into doing something. At the end of the day, you can take away liberty, you can confiscate property, but if you only ever end up taking life to enforce your rule you lack the legitimacy that comes with consent to be governed.

This does not mean that government is rendered useless, but it does provide a cautionary tale in case we start to think that government can do all that we might want it to do.

There's a further limitation, and that comes from an understanding of the law, the law given to Israel.

We see particularly clearly in Paul's writings that there are limits to the law. It can show people how far short they fall from God's perfect plan, but the law clearly failed to make Israel righteous and we too should be careful that we don't invest too much faith in a system that is after all a human construct.

And as we mentioned earlier, government is subject to the same affect of our fallen nature that our own inability to be righteous on our own so clearly demonstrates.

### **government should be diffuse**

A further limitation on government is that power should be diffuse, and by this I mean that it should be spread out rather than concentrated in one place or person.

This works itself out in two ways. Firstly political rule is not the only form of authority that we live with. There are other institutions that the Bible clearly values and it is essential that we understand the roles that the family and the church play, as well as our own freedom to self-govern, when we consider what we want the state to do.

The church exercises authority, and the authority that it exercises comes from God and not from political authorities.

This cracks open the idea that political government is the only source of authority. The family is a further structure that is given a crucial role in ensuring order and peace. In the marriage union we find another foundational social unit.

The second way that this works out is that political authority is not just not the only form of authority, but within that authority the operation of power should be diffuse.

While there is no mandate for a particular form of government under the new covenant we are told that we should live as salt and light among all people.

We can learn from the practice of Israel. God put structures in place through tribes and priests, he gave them judges, he provided them with a king when they wanted to be like other countries. He sent prophets to call the kings back to account.

The Kings which Israel so desperately desired were joined by prophets who held them to account. Power was not given to a single person, and no particular model worked better than the former.

Even the very best of people, on their way to full and final redemption through Christ are still broken and inclined to act in a way that serves themselves and not the good of all.

So political authority is created good, it is fallen and it has the potential for redemption.

We should also acknowledge that while there is clearly a legitimate role for government this role should be limited, and it should be diffuse rather than concentrated in one particular place or person.

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### **Government in the New Testament**

In the first two posts in this series I set out firstly the concept of political authority in theological terms, and then in yesterday's post what this meant for how we should view government: as both legitimate but limited. I've also briefly touched already on

the position of government and political authority in New Testament teaching, but here I want to delve a bit deeper. In particular I want to explore what impact a full understanding of the Lordship of Christ has on our engagement in politics.

Tom Wright has written extensively on this subject and a theme he returns to time and again is that Christianity has underplayed the political purpose in Christian thought, and as a result misread key aspects of the gospels and epistles.

This revolves around an incomplete understanding of what Jesus achieved through his death and resurrection.

If we understand Jesus as Lord, and subsequently understand that Caesar, or what ever contemporary ruler has taken his place in different times and contexts throughout history, are not Lord, we are free to step back and take a broader view of what Lordship means.

We've already referenced Jesus before Pilate, and his declaration that whatever political authority he exercised had been given to him.

You see, Israel wanted a liberator. They wanted a saviour who would vanquish their foes, free them from oppression and enforce the laws that were ignored.

But the coming king did not look like that.

Jesus did not ride into Jerusalem with chariots to overthrow the Roman oppressors. The Messiah who for hundreds of years they had awaited did not back the Pharisees and insist that the law, in all its detailed regulations governing every aspect of daily life, was strictly enforced. This king did not even remove himself from the enemy occupiers to create a kingdom on earth without blemish.

For Jesus those who broke the rules and those who enforced the rules were both equally wrong.

He confounded his critics and he confused his supporters.

The way that Jesus engaged in public life was completely different to anything they expected.

So when Jesus came before Pilate we see very clearly the meeting of two different kingdoms, the kingdom of the Roman Empire and the political authority that it exercised. And the Kingdom of God fully represented in the person of Jesus.

The point that Jesus' kingdom is not of this world does not mean that it is instead an entirely spiritual one.

No, Jesus' kingdom is not derived from this world, but it is designed for this world.

Tom Wright puts it like this: *"Precisely because it is the kingdom of the wise creator God who longs to heal this world, whose justice is aimed at restoration rather than punitive destruction, it can neither be advanced nor attained by the domineering, bullying fighting kingdom methods employed in merely earthly kingdoms".*



This is how Jesus redefines what Lordship means.

Yet at exactly this point he also declares support for the existence of earthly rulers. In affirming that Pilate does have authority he is advocating government over anarchy.

The worst form of government is not dictatorship but no government at all. I'd suggest that even the very worst ruler is better than a world where we are all our own tyrants and the weak are crushed in our desire to achieve the best for ourselves that we can.

God did not send his son to destroy the world but to rescue it from evil. And the structures of human society are part of the good of creation that he came to redeem.

During Jesus' ministry the disciples squabbled over who would get to sit on his left and his right, and Jesus sees all this as an adventure in missing the point.

He radically restates that the rules of this earth lord it over their subjects but under his kingdom the greatest must be the servant. Mark 10.45 offer the conclusion to this dramatic reversal: *"The son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many"*.

This is more than just a statement about the work of Jesus on the cross.

It is a radically counter imperial statement. To quote Tom Wright once again: *"it is an invitation to understand the atonement itself ... as involving God's victory not so much over the world and its powers but over the worldly ways of power."*

Romans 8 gives us a fuller picture of our hope for a new creation. It upstage the hope of Rome that is entering a new stage of its fruitfulness. It goes beyond our wildest dreams as to what a new creation could look like.

And this links back to what we've already considered: the ultimate recourse of an earthly authority is to take away life.

Jesus' victory over death, and the promise of a future resurrection, makes this exercise of power somewhat futile. Death has, after all, been defeated.

The Lordship of Christ needs to be considered alongside the biblical themes of creation and judgement. Together, in harmony, they show us the good news. That the God who made the world now rules the world through his son Jesus.

In the closing section of Romans, 15.12, Paul echoes Isaiah 11 saying *"Jesus is the one who rises to rule over the nations, and in him the nations shall hope"*.

This Lordship is not just over heaven, it is not just for the ultimate future when everything will be restored to Him. It is also for the present time, for this penultimate future where we catch a glimpse of God's coming kingdom.

And in response we are called to be the bringers of hope. The carriers of healing to a broken world. And show that Christ's rule is good news for all.

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In the final post in this series we will take a step beyond considering how we should view politics and government and set out in hazy terms what such a government should do.

If you're only just joining us I would suggest taking a moment to catch up. In the first post I explored the key characteristics of political authority, in the second how we should view government, and in the third what the Lordship of Christ meant for all this.

### **The purpose of government**

We've already looked at government as an ambiguous concept, caught in the tensions between its created status and its fallen nature, and between its legitimate role and its evident limits.

The exercise of political authority is often equally dubious. These tensions exist in what the government seeks to do and how it does it.

But we're invited to the task of living in these tensions and working to bring the redemptive hope of Christ into the outworking of government and across all of society.

Here are three broad areas which the Bible suggests should be within the scope of government.

### **Commitment to human equality**

It's astonishing that the church has let the concept of equality be snatched from its grasp, because equality is such a fundamental part of biblical teaching.

We are all equal under God, this is true in our created status. It is true in the universality of sin, and it is true in our universal need for redemption.

Jesus was radically inclusive in his ministry, he deliberately sided with the poor and the disenfranchised. He overturned the social order and he overturned the tables of those who would profit from the poorest.

But that wasn't where equality began. In the laws for Israel there was a strong theme of justice running through them. The laws for the ownership of property and slaves ensured that intergenerational social mobility was not hampered. Israel was warned against taking a king and the prophets railed against the injustices perpetrated by them.

In Paul's letter to the Corinthians he exhorts them to generosity, and he uses the old Testament portrait of the manna provided in the desert to point out that those who gathered much did not have too much and those who gathered little did not have too little.

## **For the common good**

All governments promote and seek some form of common good. What this looks like is different in different contexts and sometimes gets lost in the pursuit of just judgement.

Thomas Aquinas noted that the common good existed for the good of the people and not for the good of the ruler. For much of history this was not the way that political authority operated.

The concept of the common good is based on the idea that a community is more than a series of disconnected individuals, it works upon the coming together of those people and their working together for a common cause.

While Christianity has often emphasised individual choice, especially in relation to salvation, it has also affirmed the need for community structures that enable us to live fulfilled lives as part of wider society.

It is the role of government to promote such structures while making sure that they do not dominate them. When the common good comes to the fore it makes sure that no one suffers permanent social exclusion.

This means that particular attention should be paid to those who are liable to experience such exclusion. David McIlroy comments, *"The weight of the classical tradition is solidly behind the prioritising of the needs of the weakest, in whom it has been recognised that we see the face of Christ with special clarity."*

## **Exercise of just judgement**

The third core function of government, alongside a commitment to equality and working for the common good is the exercise of just judgement.

The Christian tradition has long acknowledged that the Christian ruler must discern the requirements of Christian moral teaching within and for the complex realities of the society that has to be governed.

This means that there are very few absolutes of what a governing system should look like. I think if we cast our minds through history we can see the rights and wrongs of political systems of every hue. Including those who explicitly reject Christian teaching, and those claiming to govern in its name.

It is not possible to take judgements in a neutral space. It is simply one of the myths of contemporary political thought that there exists a space where all prejudices and conceptions of the common good can be removed and a judgement reached that abides by the rules of justice and nothing else.

Instead, we have to accept that there are many competing claims to subjective morality, and these require us to offer a substantive argument for why the values we hold, and the truths we believe, are for the common good.

And we need to keep one eye on the fact that human concepts of justice will only ever be limitedly just. This means that the capability of government to promote the good, and exercise judgement, while present, is limited.

## **Conclusion**

The apostles chose to reinforce the radical message of Jesus' death and resurrection and refused to accept the absolute claims to authority that the Roman Empire demanded.

But they didn't reject the fact that it had authority, they just saw its authority as limited. They continued to remind the authorities of their duties and responsibilities and reflected the role of the prophets in the Old Testament.

We must remember that neither tyranny nor anarchy are what God desires. The institutions of political authority have good in them as they reflect the nature of our created God. But they are also fallen because they are formed by fallen humans.

But most of all, we must hold to the hope for the ultimate redemption of all things and how we are commanded to have a role in that rebuilding.